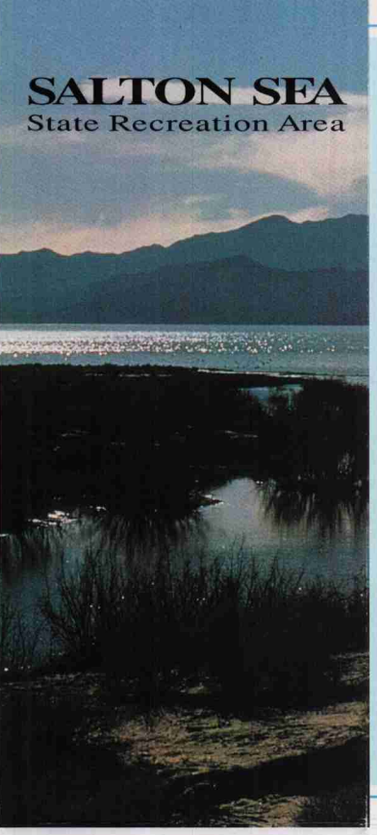


SALTON SEA
State Recreation Area

Salton Sea, the largest lake in California, is a recreational oasis in the middle of the Colorado Desert just three hour's drive from either San Diego or Los Angeles. The park is especially popular during the autumn, winter, and spring seasons when thousands of people visit Salton Sea to escape the seasonal hardships characteristic of other areas. Temperatures remain in the 70s and 80s throughout the winter and there are plenty of opportunities for camping, fishing, swimming, waterskiing, boating, and sightseeing.

Summer temperatures soar over 100 degrees F nearly every day, and humidity is often high. About half of this area's 2.5 inches of annual rainfall occurs during the winter. The other half comes from summer thunderstorms.

Picnic tables, some with shade ramadas and barbecues, are located on the lakeshore near park headquarters and Mecca Beach Campgrounds. Fuel for the barbeques can be purchased near the park. The visitor center at the Headquarters Campground features a video program and other exhibits about the history of the Salton Sea. A self-guided nature trail runs between the headquarters area and Mecca Beach Campground. The Desert Botanical Garden behind the check-in station can also help you get acquainted with the plants that are native to this area.

Camping

The park's campgrounds are open year-round and regular campfire programs are held at the headquarters campground. A program schedule is posted on the park bulletin boards.

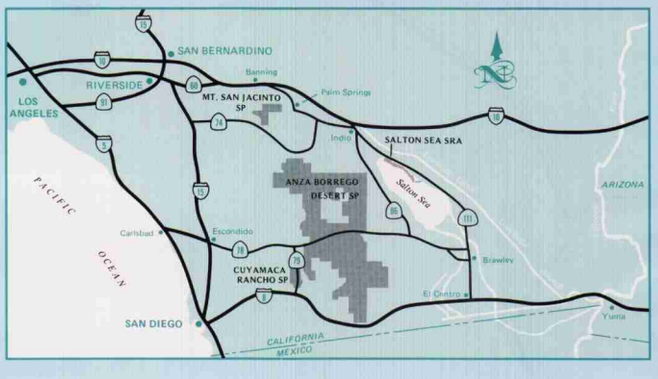
The *Headquarters Campground* has 40 sites with paved parking, fire rings, tables, and shade ramadas. These sites will accommodate trailers and motorhomes up to 30 feet long. A trailer sanitation station is located nearby. Fifteen of the sites have water, electric, and sewer hookups that will accommodate large RV's.

Drinking-water spigots are scattered throughout the campground and the wheelchair-accessible restrooms, have flush toilets, sinks and solar assisted hot showers.

The *Mecca Beach Campground*, 1.5 miles south of park headquarters, has 110 sites with paved parking, tables, and fire rings. Most of these sites are shaded by tamarisk trees and all of them will accommodate RVs up to 30 feet long. A swimming beach is nearby. Wheelchair-accessible restrooms have flush toilets, sinks and solar-heated showers.

The *Corvina Beach, Salt Creek, and Bombay Beach Campgrounds* are primitive, with dirt roads and chemical toilets, but will accommodate RVs of any size. (You must bring your own water to Salt Creek). The 800 sites are at the water's edge, and many people launch small boats from the beach, or pull their boats up on the beach at their campsites.

Campsite reservations can be made year round by calling MISTIX at 1-800/444-7275 and using your Visa or Mastercard. You can also make reservations through the mail and pay by check. MISTIX applications are available at all state parks. Contact the park unit you wish to visit for additional information.



Fishing

Fishing is the most popular recreational activity at Salton Sea. Shoreline fishing is generally excellent and both the harbor jetty and Sneaker Beach are especially popular spots. Large catches of sargo, tilapia, and gulf croaker are common. Fish and Game regulations are enforced. Please feel free to ask the park staff for current information about limits and regulations.

The sea is warm and shallow, very hospitable to the plankton that are the food of small fish that are in turn preyed upon by larger fish. This abundance of life makes the sea the richest inland fishery in California though summer algae blooms - "green tides" - can cause temporary loss of dissolved oxygen, so that fish trapped in these blooms suffocate.

The fish that came in with the river water in the flood of 1905-07 slowly died out as the sea became saltier. In 1929-1930 the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) planted silver salmon, striped bass, anchovy, and long-jawed mudsuckers, but these fish also failed to survive the increasing salinity. In the 1950s, DFG introduced several species of fish from the Gulf of California, and today's catches of sargo, Gulf croaker, and orangemouth corvina are the results of that effort. The totuava was also planted but apparently did not reproduce, although on certain occasions, tall tales circulate about gigantic, 14-foot-long fish in the sea.

Another species now common in the sea is the tilapia, a native to the Middle East or Africa. Tilapia were planted in irrigation canals in an unsuccessful effort to control algae and worked their way down to the Salton Sea, where they have flourished. They reach sexual maturity in two months and, with favorable conditions, they reproduce almost once a month.

The only native fish in the Salton Sea is the desert pupfish, which is now threatened by the tilapia's success. Other non-game fish include millies, mosquito fish, and the now rare mullet, which supported a commercial fishery here until 1950.

Fishing Tips

The sea offers good fishing year-round; the most successful anglers vary their tackle and techniques according to the time of year, water temperatures, and weather. Fishing is permitted all along the park's 18-mile shoreline and fishing boats can be rented from marinas near the park. Ask the park staff for directions. There's a boat launching ramp and dock, boat wash, and fish-cleaning house at the Headquarters Campground.

Orangemouth corvina can be caught near shore from May through October; use live bait such as small tilapia, croaker, sargo, or mudsuckers. Shallow running shad-type lures or shiny metal spoons also work. Since the corvina has sharp teeth, some anglers use wire leaders. Fish in deeper water from December to March; use a jig with metal spoons or lead head jigs. The corvina is the largest fish in the sea. The average catch is 3 to 12 pounds; the largest recorded was 37 pounds. It is highly prized as a food fish.

The *croaker*, or bairdiella, are schooling fish that spend the warm summer months close to shore, moving to deeper water in the winter. The best season is April through October; the best baits include small minnows, spoons, spinners, nightcrawlers, or cut bait. At times, they'll hit anything that moves. They range from 7 to 15 inches and have excellent flavor.

Sargo, an ocean grunt, bite best between November and April when the water is cold. They like canned whole-kernel corn, nightcrawlers, or shrimp on a No. 6 bait holder hook. Sargo can be real fighters, and large catches of half- to three-pound fish are common. They have a good flavor and are especially good when deep fried.

Tilapia can be caught all year, but the best fishing occurs when the water temperature is above 64 degrees (they die if the water temperature drops below 55 degrees for any length of time). The best season for Tilapia is from April through November; use red worms and nightcrawlers on a No. 6 bait holder hook. Tilapia show strong territorial behavior and can often be caught during spawning/nesting periods by jigging metal spoons near the nests. They average from one to two pounds in weight, with large ones going over three and a half pounds. They taste somewhat like scallops and are best when skinned and filleted.

Health Advisory

Check the Fish and Game regulations or ask the park staff about any Health Advisories that may be in effect on the Salton Sea.

The Salton Trough

The valley in which the Salton Sea is located is still sinking. It is part of the seam between two huge sections(or tectonic plates) that form the earth's surface. Such seams usually occur underwater, on the ocean floor. Here, along the San Andreas fault system the Pacific plate is sliding past the rest of the North American continent, and the Salton Trough is subsiding at the rate of about two and a half inches a year. That may not sound like much, but the process has been going on for quite a while. The original surface bedrock is now more than four miles down, buried under ever increasing deposits of sediment.

The surface of the Salton Sea is 228 feet below sea level. The lowest part of the sea bottom is 278 feet below sea level. But the valley is surrounded by mountains, some of which are as much as ten thousand feet high. During the winter, their snow-covered peaks make a striking contrast with the gray-green desert plants of the valley.

As the Pacific and North American plates continue to move, the crust of the earth is being fractured and stretched thin throughout the Salton Trough. This process not only results in earthquakes but also allows molten magma to work its way up through the surface of the earth to form volcanic domes such as Obsidian Butte and Mullet Island on the southeast side of the sea. The process also tends to heat ground water, resulting in hot springs and boiling mud pots. Some of these subterranean hot-water reservoirs are being used to produce steam to power electrical generating plants. Contact the park staff for further information about recreational hot springs opportunities.

In ages past, the Salton Trough was an extension of the gulf of California, which separates Baja California from the rest of Mexico. In carving the Grand Canyon, the Colorado River carried millions of tons of silt across the Colorado Plateau and deposited it here in this area, forming a levee that eventually separated this part of the trough from the rest of the Gulf. An inland sea formed behind the levee and then gradually dried up, though the river occasionally cut a new channel through its self-made levee and refilled the valley with a huge freshwater lake that would last until the river changed channels again. Each time this cycle was repeated, more silt was brought in and more salts and minerals were left behind as the water once again evaporated.

The freshwater lakes created by the Colorado provided for a variety of plants and animals through the ages. Sabre-tooth cats, for example, and mammoths, camels, horses, and zebras once roamed here. The Cahuilla Indians settled here beside Lake Cahuilla some three thousand years ago, but the Colorado again changed its course and the lake dried up, leaving a only a desert salt flat. The Cahuilla adapted to the changed conditions, however, and were still living here when early Spanish and American explorers passed through. Descendents of the early Cahuilla residents of this area still live in this general vicinity.

An Accidental Sea

Few early settlers were willing to take on the harsh desert environment of the Salton Sink, but when the railroad connecting New Orleans and Los Angeles was built during the late 1800s, the only thing preventing an agricultural bonanza was the lack of water. To overcome this problem, the California Development Company was organized to build a canal that would bring water in from the Colorado River. By 1905, the population of this area had grown to over thirteen thousand people.

While the canal was still under construction, the builders began to experience unexpected problems. They had seriously underestimated the erosive power of the river, and soon tons of silt began to block the gates that controlled the river's flow. The new gate that the company built to bypass the blocked section wasn't adequate to hold back the spring floods, and early in 1905 it broke. All at once, the entire flow of the river began to enter the valley.

Despite heroic efforts to return the river to its former channel, the Colorado emptied into the Salton Sink for almost two years. Farms were inundated and farm houses were destroyed as were the salt-works of the New Liverpool Salt Company, which had been harvesting the salt left by the ancient Gulf and its many evaporated lakes. When the gap in the levee was finally closed there was a lake 45 miles long and 17 miles wide, with a surface 195 feet below sea level.

Evaporation gradually reduced the size of this new lake, and agriculture prospered in the adjacent lowlands. Today, the lake is more or less stabilized, with rainfall and irrigation runoff more or less matching the amount of water that evaporates each year - - though heavy rains in recent winters have raised the lake level somewhat. The Imperial and Coachella Valleys are now one of the most productive agricultural areas in the world, with over 600,000 acres of irrigated farmland reclaimed from the desert.

Salton Sea Today...And Tomorrow

Today, Salton Sea is about 35 miles long and 15 miles wide at its widest point, with more than 360 square miles of surface and 110 miles of shoreline. It's quite shallow: average overall depth is less than 20 feet. Water temperature varies from 55 degrees F in winter to 92 degrees in summer. The salinity was 43,000 ppm (parts per million) and increased in 1990. By comparison, salinity of the Pacific Ocean is 35,000 ppm. Utah's Great Salt Lake is 276,000 ppm.

The sea is fed by three rivers: the Whitewater River at the north end, and the Alamo and New Rivers at the south end. There are also many small streams and irrigation canals draining into it. This runoff water is low in salt content- - only 3,500 ppm- - but it nevertheless adds 4.5 million tons of salt to the lake each year. As the water evaporates, the salt and minerals are left behind. Eventually the sea may become too saline for the fish and the plankton on which they feed, unless a plan is developed to stabilize its salinity. Without such a plan, the tremendous wildlife, fishery, and recreational values of the Salton Sea could be lost.

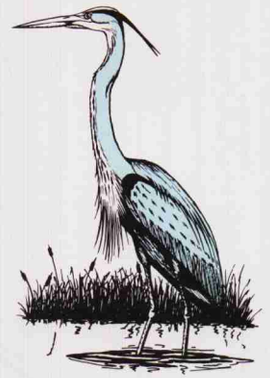
Wildlife of the Salton Sea Area

Salton Sea's rare blend of desert and aquatic environments supports some 350 species of birds, including some considered rare or endangered. In winter there are thousands of migratory waterfowl including Canada and snow geese and a variety of ducks: mallards, pintails, ruddies, green-winged and cinammon teal. Great blue herons, egrets and other shore and wading birds can often be seen in the lake's marshy areas.

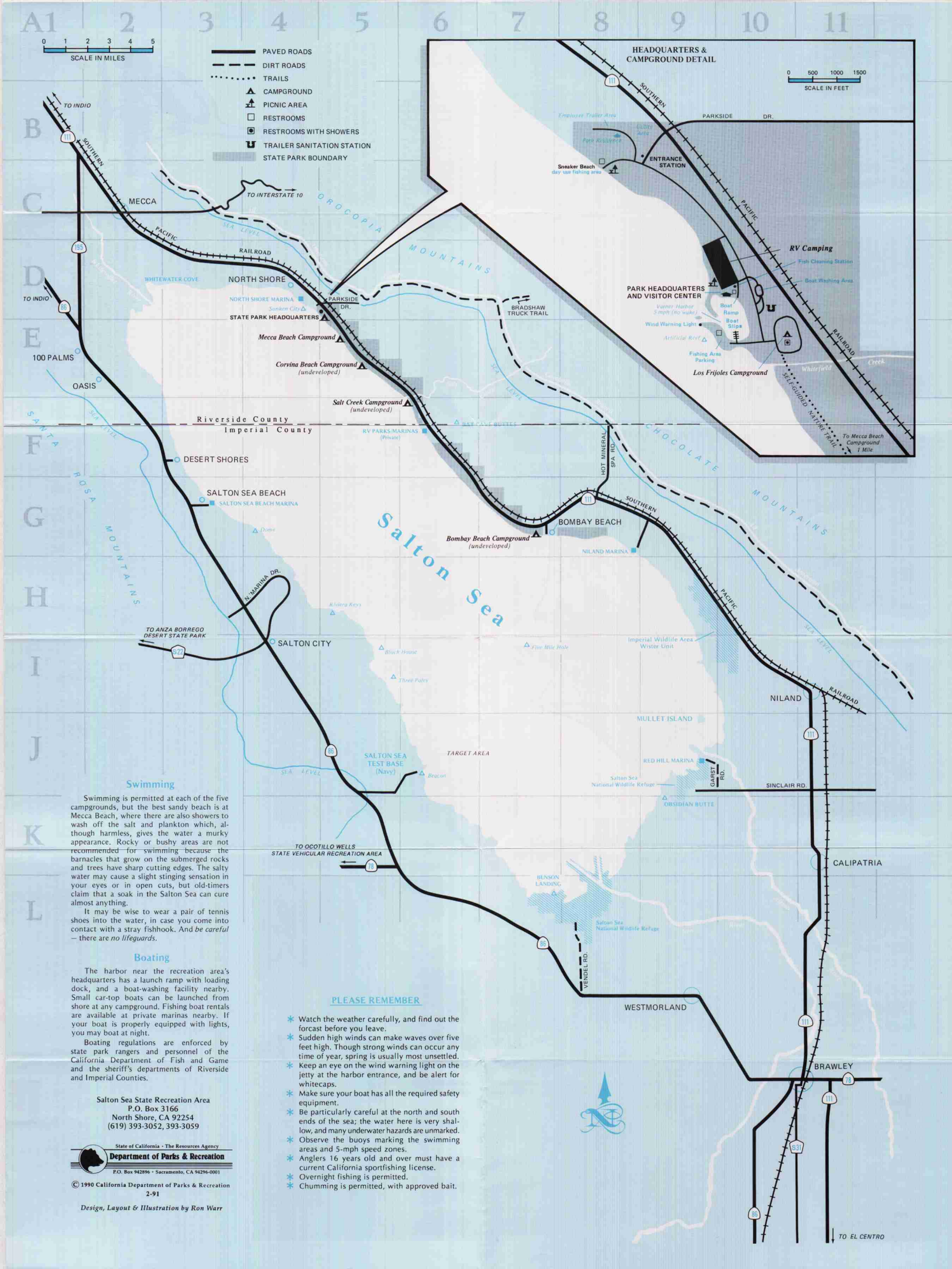
Favorite spots for birdwatching are the marsh areas south of the fishing jetty, Sneaker Beach, just north of the entrance station at the Headquarters Campground, and the shore between Headquarters and Mecca Beach Campgrounds. You may also enjoy a visit to the Wister Waterfowl Management Area, the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, Red Hill Marina, or the Whitewater River delta (see map).

This very low-lying portion of the Colorado Desert is high in salts and alkali, so the plants that grow here, such as goldenbush, desert holly, and narrow-leaved wing scale, must be especially salt tolerant. Higher elevation areas feature more typical desert plants such as creosote bush, ocotillo, burrobush, and mesquite.

Though this land seems almost devoid of wildlife, a surprising number of animals nevertheless make this their home. Many desert animals forage at night to avoid the heat. In late evening, therefore, you are apt to see blacktail jackrabbits, cottontails, kangaroo rats, round-tailed ground squirrels, kit foxes, and bobcats, and hear the coyote's serenade. A wide variety of reptiles live here. Walking through the sandy washes you are apt to spot the tracks of a sidewinder rattlesnake. In spring and fall you may see a desert iguana (they look like miniature dinosaurs) as well as several other kinds of lizard. Muskrats and raccoons live in the marshy areas.



Great Blue Heron



Swimming

Swimming is permitted at each of the five campgrounds, but the best sandy beach is at Mecca Beach, where there are also showers to wash off the salt and plankton which, although harmless, gives the water a murky appearance. Rocky or bushy areas are not recommended for swimming because the barnacles that grow on the submerged rocks and trees have sharp cutting edges. The salty water may cause a slight stinging sensation in your eyes or in open cuts, but old-timers claim that a soak in the Salton Sea can cure almost anything.

It may be wise to wear a pair of tennis shoes into the water, in case you come into contact with a stray fishhook. And *be careful* — there are *no lifeguards*.

Boating

The harbor near the recreation area's headquarters has a launch ramp with loading dock, and a boat-washing facility nearby. Small car-top boats can be launched from shore at any campground. Fishing boat rentals are available at private marinas nearby. If your boat is properly equipped with lights, you may boat at night.

Boating regulations are enforced by state park rangers and personnel of the California Department of Fish and Game and the sheriff's departments of Riverside and Imperial Counties.

Salton Sea State Recreation Area
P.O. Box 3166
North Shore, CA 92254
(619) 393-3052, 393-3059

State of California · The Resources Agency
Department of Parks & Recreation
P.O. Box 942896 · Sacramento, CA 94296-0001

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Design, Layout & Illustration by Ron Warr

PLEASE REMEMBER

- Watch the weather carefully, and find out the forcast before you leave.
- Sudden high winds can make waves over five feet high. Though strong winds can occur any time of year, spring is usually most unsettled.
- Keep an eye on the wind warning light on the jetty at the harbor entrance, and be alert for whitecaps.
- Make sure your boat has all the required safety equipment.
- Be particularly careful at the north and south ends of the sea; the water here is very shallow, and many underwater hazards are unmarked.
- Observe the buoys marking the swimming areas and 5-mph speed zones.
- Anglers 16 years old and over must have a current California sportfishing license.
- Overnight fishing is permitted.
- Chumming is permitted, with approved bait.